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# The Figure in American Sculpture

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LOS ANGELES COUNTY MUSEUM OF ART

*February 26–April 30, 1995*



**SCULPTURE AS A MODERN ART FORM in the United States**

*emerged at the turn of the century and evolved during the next four decades in response to the country's changing cultural, social, and political conditions. Americans abandoned the production of public monuments and formal portraits to create sculpture of a highly personal and expressive nature.*

*All the sculptors in this exhibition explored new themes, styles, and sources of inspiration while retaining the human figure as their principal motif. They have been neglected by history because critics and scholars since World War II have defined modernism as pure abstraction. However, in the early twentieth-century modernism was more broadly interpreted as a spirit of inventiveness and openness.*

*Sculpture as a profession during this period became less elitist. Massive immigration, urbanization, and other social developments encouraged women, African Americans, and other previously marginalized groups to create art. While past exhibitions have isolated these artists according to race, ethnic group, and gender, The Figure in American Sculpture is the first to place them within the mainstream.*

## The Influence of Rodin

The French sculptor Auguste Rodin (1840–1917) rejected the traditional notion that sculpture had to be commemorative or educational. Upholding the primacy of the personal realm, he used the nude to explore themes of contemplation, emotional turmoil, love, and sexuality. Americans began to realize his significance in the 1890s. By the time Chester Beach (1881–1956) carved his evocative marble on the subject of love and loss (fig. 1), Americans could identify Rodin as the source for Beach's sensual rendering of the nudes and juxtaposition of highly polished and rough stone surfaces. American artists enthusiastically adopted Rodin's practice of exploiting the unique qualities of his materials and began to treat bronze as a rippling, reflective surface and to suggest that stone could appear soft and sensual.

Arthur Pitman (1873–1930) and Harriet Frishmuth (1880–1980) carried on Rodin's fascination with the expressive potential of the human body, focusing on the figure in motion. Later Gaston Lachaise (1882–1935) among others embraced Rodin's belief that the partial figure (often just a torso) could be as evocative as a complete body.



1  
Chester Beach  
(United States, 1881–1956)  
**THE RIVER'S RETURN TO THE SEA**  
1926, marble, 14 x 45<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> x 15 in. (35.6 x 115.6 x 38.1 cm).  
Dr. James D. Zidell

## Modern Genre

Some sculptors rejected the romanticism of Rodin's nudes, preferring genre, the depiction of the daily activities of ordinary people. The rise of American genre sculpture, like that of the contemporary Ashcan school of painting, paralleled the growth of modern cities with their attendant diversions and problems.

Among the earliest genre specialists were a number of women. Their subjects ranged from aristocratic ladies at leisure depicted by Bessie Potter Vonnoh (1872–1955) to playful immigrant children from New York's Lower East Side by Abastenia St. Leger Eberle (1878–1942). The quintessential theme was the male urban worker. Native and immigrant artists, such as Max Kalish (1891?–1945) and Saul Baizerman (1889–1957), honored the laborer as the hero of the industrial age, thereby glorifying America in its new modern identity.

After World War I some artists turned to escapist themes, as did Alexander Calder (1898–1976) in his whimsical sculptures of circus performers (fig. 2). Genre sculpture

reached its fullest expression during the 1930s, partly fueled by the federal art projects' call for images of the common man. Artists shifted from the glorification of the working class to the raw expression of its suffering. Increasing racial strife inspired sculptures against lynching. Civil unrest in Mexico led Octavio Medellín (b. 1907) to convey the righteousness of his people's cause in *The Spirit of the Revolution*. Eventually antwar protests appeared.



## Modern Classicism

Some sculptors turned to cultures historically or geographically distant as an alternative to the increasingly technological aspect of American society. For centuries classical Greece and Rome had inspired artists desirous of reinvigorating their art with a sense of order and calm. Although twentieth-century neoclassicism included idealized portraits and representations of mythical stories, it differed in several ways from earlier revivals. Paul Manship (1885–1966) and C. Paul Jennewein (1890–1978), trained at the American Academy in Rome, preferred the angular, almost naive art of archaic Greece to the high classical style of the Periclean age. The ancients' emphasis on purity of form did encourage more abstracted works, such as the floating torsos of Alexander Archipenko (1887–1964) and Lachaise's bulbous loining nudes.

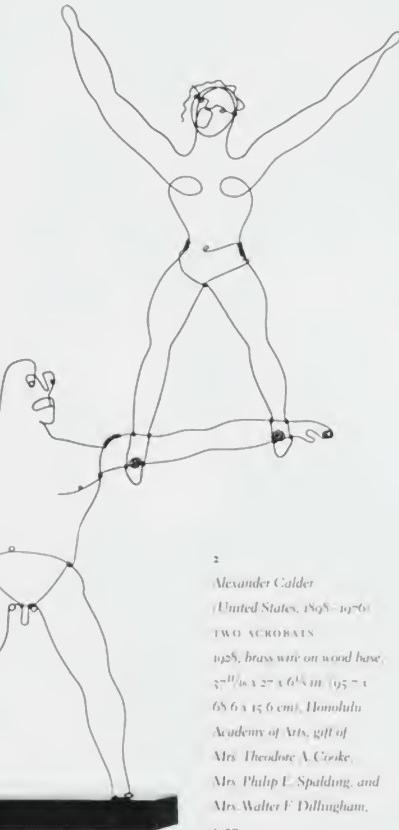
The most distinctive trait of modern classicism was a fascination for surface treatment. Modernists challenged the primacy of white sculpture, realizing that the Greeks had originally colored much of their statuary. Consequently, twentieth-century classicists painted their sculptures in vibrant hues and experimented with different patinas on their bronzes, as seen in the lustrous black of Jennewein's *Greek Dance* (fig. 3). The sleek surfaces and stylized, rhythmic shapes associated with modern classicism were well suited to the streamlined character of industrial design and became known when applied to interior decoration and architecture as art deco.

## The Impact of Cubism and Other Avant-garde European Movements

Archipenko, Calder, and Isamu Noguchi (1904–88) are today the best known of the early progressive sculptors. Many others, however, also explored avant-garde European styles. Yet despite a great deal of experimentation, most Americans resisted complete abstraction and the nonobjective prior to 1945.

The majority of Americans adhered to a style derived from cubism or its offshoot, futurism. John Storrs (1885–1956) most consistently demonstrated an understanding of the principles of cubism as the decomposition of objects into intersecting planes. Others reinterpreted or misinterpreted cubism. Most, such as Cesar Stea (1895–1960) in his *Man with Book*, thought it meant merely the simplification of natural forms into geometric shapes. Hard-edge, cubic figures accorded well with the machine age aesthetics of the era.

Experimentation with nontraditional media led to a questioning of the basic principles of sculpture. Archipenko modeled his surrealist *Kneeling Figure* (fig. 4) in terra-cotta, replacing solid material with holes in an unprecedented way. Calder took the concept of negative space one step further in his wire sculptures, completely contradicting the notion of sculptural solidity. Noguchi, Tarko Trajan (1887–1959), and others used industrial materials such as plastic, metal, and cement to achieve a variety of effects.



**2**  
Alexander Calder  
(United States, 1898–1976)  
**TWO ACROBATS**  
1928, brass wire on wood base,  
37<sup>11/16</sup> x 32<sup>1/2</sup> x 6<sup>1/4</sup> in. (95.7 x  
81.6 x 15.6 cm), Honolulu  
Academy of Arts, gift of  
Mrs. Theodore A. Cooke,  
Mrs. Philip E. Spalding, and  
Mrs. Walter F. Dillingham,  
1937



3

C. Paul Fennewein

(Germany, 1890–1978)

GREEK DANCE

1925, bronze, 20<sup>1/2</sup> x 16 x

6<sup>1/4</sup> in. (52.1 x 40.6 x 15.9 cm).

Los Angeles County Museum  
of Art, gift of 1994 Collectors  
Committee

4

Alexander Archipenko

(Russia, 1887–1964)

KNEELING FIGURE

1935, terra-cotta, 26<sup>1/2</sup> x 11<sup>1/2</sup> x

6<sup>1/4</sup> in. (67.3 x 29.2 x 16.5 cm).

Hughes and Sheila Potiker





5

*Nancy Prophet*

(United States, 1890–1960)

CONGO LAIS

1931, wood, 1<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> x 6<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> x8<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> in. (43.5 x 17.2 x

20.5 cm), Whitney Museum

of American Art, purchase

Photograph: Geoffrey

Clements

### American Primitivism

The American fascination with non-Western, Native American, and folk cultures began in the 1910s as industrialization and urbanization threatened to destabilize traditional notions of identity. Primitivism (the interest of modern Western artists in tribal arts and cultures) took a somewhat different form in America than in Europe. Its practitioners were more diverse in terms of race, class, ethnicity, and gender and consequently were open to a broader range of sources than the Europeans, who focused on African and Oceanic art.

A number of Americans created sculptures of an ethnographic nature to monumentalize cultures and races that were disappearing. In *Congolais* (fig. 5) Nancy Prophet (1890–1960) probed the spirit of the African warrior. Works by West Coast artists Beniamino Bufano (c. 1898–1970), Allan Clark (1896–1950), and Jacques Sennier (1898–1988) were informed by extended trips to Asia. Eugenie Shinnard (1886–1978) searched closer to home—at the Indian pueblos of New Mexico—while William Artis (1914–77) and Sargent Johnson (1887–1967) celebrated the beauty and dignity of members of their own African American communities.

Many Americans were influenced by primitive aesthetics, that is, the art of untrained artisans. Elie Nadelman (1882–1946) was inspired by the folk art he collected. The technique of direct carving had the greatest impact because executing one's own sculpture by hand instead of supervising a team of assistants stimulated greater personal expression.



and immediacy. The first American primitivists hewed wood, carving totemic sculptures, such as *The Lindbergh Family* (fig. 6) by Chaim Gross (1904–91), which recall African fetish objects. By the late 1920s and 1930s artists chiseled in stone and looked also to Mesoamerica, ancient Egypt, and other sources for inspiration. John Flanagan (1895–1942) and younger artists, such as Cleo Hartwig (1907–88), retained the massive, blocky quality of the original stone and communicated a primordial sense of permanence that foreshadowed the abstract expressionist art of the succeeding era.

## 6

Chaim Gross

*Austria Hungary*, 1934–36

*The Lindbergh Family*

1932; golden streak sap wood;

Charles Lindbergh (left)

46 x 11 x 6 1/2 in. (117 x 28 x 16 cm.)

1936; Anne Lindbergh

46 1/2 x 6 1/2 x 5 1/2 in. (118 x 16 x 14 cm.)

© 1995, Chaim Gross/The

Renee & Chaim Gross

Foundation, New York City

Photograph: Joseph Cossutta Jr.

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